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ABSTRACT

Although many universities are involved in competency based teacher education programs, Illinois State University has probably had the most experience (as of this time) with this instructional model in terms of program breadth and student involvement. In the three years of its operation, the competency based teacher education program for secondary school teachers has enrolled approximately 1,900 students per semester. This program, entitled Professional Education Sequence, covers eight required semester hours of teacher education encompassing the areas of American Public Education, Secondary School Reading, and Secondary School Methods and Curriculum. From the experience of Illinois State University's competency based teacher education program, various advantages and problems of this model in instruction have been uncovered in the following areas: (1) Competency based programs are built around meaningful instructional objectives that are behaviorally stated so that they can be observed or measured in terms of student learning rather than teacher activity; (2) Competency based instruction is criterion referenced rather than norm referenced so there is no need for grades; (3) Students can receive immediate feedback concerning their progress in reaching the desired proficiency in each teaching skill; (4) Competency based instruction is multi-media oriented and is one of the most flexible models of teacher education; (5) Students are actively involved in the learning activities. They participate, interact with the materials, and work with the faculty on a one-to-one basis. (MM)

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Competency Based Teacher Education: Pleasures and Perils

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Although many universities are involved to various degrees in competency based teacher education, in terms of program breadth and student involvement, Illinois State University has probably had more experience with this instructional model than any other institution at this time. In the three years of its operation, the competency based teacher education program for secondary school teachers has enrolled approximately 1,900 students per semester. This program, entitled Professional Education Sequence, covers eight required semester hours of teacher education encompassing the areas of American Public Education, Secondary School Reading and Secondary School Methods and Curriculum.

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As one reads the literature and listens to many glowing reports of these programs, which deal with from 25 to 200 students, one encounters accounts of a model of teacher education which appears to be far superior to the traditional classroom. While the merits of competency based education are heartily agreed with, there is need to be concerned about the seeming lack of reports which identify and discuss the weaknesses in the model. Perhaps this kind of data appears to be lacking in the literature because most competency based programs at this point in time are dealing with small numbers of students. Under such conditions weaknesses may not be readily apparent or intolerable. However, with as many "live bodies" participating in a program as are in the Illinois State University program, weaknesses in the instructional model very quickly become recognizable and must be dealt with.

With every pleasure involved in competency based teacher education, there appears to be an equal peril involved which must be reckoned with. The purpose of this paper is to look at these potential pitfalls as well as to consider the advantages in this new model of teacher education.

A Structural Base of Instructional Objectives

Competency based programs are built around meaningful instructional objectives which pull together the "meat" of several courses, yet avoid needless repetition and overlap. Thus, students perceive of teacher education as a meaningful whole, rather than disjointed, irrelevant segments. These objectives are behaviorally stated so that they can be observed or measured. They are stated in terms of student learning rather than in terms of teacher activity. Therefore, the emphasis is where it should be--on the student rather than on the teacher.

Such objectives do well with learning in the cognitive domain, but tend to minimizing teaching important affective domain objectives because these are difficult to observe or to measure. Moreover, defining these objectives, and building the learning modules with accompanying evaluation procedures is an extremely time consuming task. Modules require extensive field testing and evaluation before becoming operational. Writing and re-writing become a never ending staff responsibility. Therefore, such effort is worthy of staff released time and renumeration, adequate secretarial support and audio-visual production assistance. Program implementation without such support results in severe frustration both faculty and student.

Criterion Referenced Evaluation

Since competency based instruction is criterion referenced rather than norm referenced, there is no need for grades. Failure and borderline passing of courses is eliminated. As an alternative to this the student simply keeps working until he meets the designated criterion for competency. It then follows that the student has more opportunity to develop the finer skills of teaching than can be accomodated through traditional models of teacher education.

But many students feel insecure without grades. There is a tendency for students to become test-oriented rather than to emphasize learning in order to become excellent teachers. They become uninterested in anything whatsoever which is not on some competency test. Students also tend to become "learners in a hurry" because they are not pacing themselves properly and thus have no time for "in depth" learning, even when it is available to them.

Although competency based education offers more opportunities to evaluate teaching performance rather than mere memorization of educational concepts, this may be only theoretically possible. Because of the large

number of students involved in the program, it has been noted that far too much of the competency evaluation must be done by paper and pencil tests which can be scored by the computer rather than the more preferred observation of teaching competency. Most faculty members are not expert in building valid tests of this type. Thus, the tests themselves are sometimes unintentionally ambiguous and inadequate measures of the competency. Test security becomes a problem which mandates the accumulation of many equivalent alternative forms of each test, and continual rewriting and revision of the tests.

On most tests, 80% correct is designated as an adequate level of proficiency. It has been reasoned that such a high requirement in the program eliminates low quality teacher candidates who might otherwise pass a traditional program with C or D grades. In this new model of teacher education, students either reach the required proficiency, or they do not complete their training program.

Such conclusions may be unwarranted since 80% proficiency level is an arbitrary figure. It further presumes that individuals who cannot achieve success in this type of instructional delivery system will not be good teachers. Both assumptions may be unfounded.

Immediate Feedback

A strength of competency based programs is that students can receive immediate feedback concerning their progress in reaching the desired proficiency in each of the teaching skills. However, in a large program the task of providing feedback and of keeping records can become unmanageable, and therefore, must be handled by computer services.

Among students, such a surveillance system breeds the feeling that "big brother is watching you," thus fosters antagonism. They also perceive it as being dehumanizing and impersonal. Furthermore, computers are only as valid as the data fed to the system by human programmers. Human errors, mechanical breakdowns, and delays in printouts are a constant source of irritation to both students and faculty.

Multi-media Orientation

Competency based programs are multi-media oriented, thus allowing students to utilize their most effective learning modalities. Nonetheless, it has been noted that most students are visually oriented and will utilize materials utilizing the other modalities only when they do not have a choice. For many students even the visual modality is not entirely adequate for learning because they have not developed the level of sophistication in reading and study skills which is demanded for success in any kind of independent study program.

At this stage of development, appropriate audio-visual materials which would fit into a competency based program are difficult to find on the commercial market. Therefore, it becomes an additional task of the staff to create such materials.

Program Felxibility

Competency based instruction easily becomes one of the most flexible models of teacher education. Programs are individually paced, thus avoiding large lecture sections and any class attendance. Students can work through the program at their own convenience and discretion.

However, strict adherence to the flexibility and self-directiveness of the model can deny structure and direction to students who require such

for success in learning. Thus, it is possible for this new model to become a far more rigid "box" for students than traditional educative models ever were. It has been painfully noted that a large percentage of university students are not ready to accept the responsibility for their own learning. They have not been trained to be self-motivated, self-directed learners. They have difficulty getting started, establishing working schedules, and meeting long-range deadlines without intervening short-term requirements, and much of the traditional class structure to prod them on.

Working through self-instructional modules can become lonely learning. Both faculty and students soon miss the pleasures of group interaction. The student-to-student learning, which was the strength of many discussion oriented instructional systems is minimized by individually paced self-instructional packages.

Another advantage of this type of instructional delivery system is that learning activities can be designed which would be specific for a particular individual need or for the needs of a certain teaching area. An individually tailored program of teacher education can be designed for each student, if desired. However, it has been noted that few students take advantage of this opportunity. They do not appear to desire to do anything that everyone else does not have to do. Moreover, such individual programming requires more time of an already overloaded teaching staff. Preparing instructional modules is an exacting, time-consuming process. There is little doubt that even when operating at an optimum level of efficiency, competency based education requires far more staff time, energy and involvement than does any kind of traditional system.

The flexibility in competency based instructional modules facilites quick revision and updating as needed. Indeed, an undergirding tenet of the system is that such revision must occur continuously. But revision of modules becomes a complex procedure. Because of the breadth and complexity of the program, as well as the individuality and uniqueness of the design of competency based programs, making such changes can be like pulling a brick out of the bottom of a stack! Each small change affects everything else and everyone else.

Student and Faculty Involvement

Students must become involved in the learning activities. They must participate, interact with the materials, do the assignments and work with faculty on a one-to-one basis. They are no longer permitted to sit passively in a lecture section and then receive a grade.

Because of this, there is a tremendously vocal student outrage. In the past they have cried for relief from class attendance and from "mickey mouse" assignments; they have begged for opportunity for interaction with faculty rather than be taught through lecture-discussion type teaching; they have chafed for independence in learning. Yet, when a self-directive program is built which mandates the learning environment which students have requested, they find that they are not ready to accept the subsequent responsibility for learning. Many expend their efforts in devising means of "beating the system" rather than learning from it. It is obvious that public schools and society has not prepared this generation of students to function effectively within the framework of the competency based education model.

Although competency based instruction offers students more opportunity for individual interaction with faculty, for years we have conditioned students not to seek this kind of interaction because with traditional instruction faculty simply could not handle such time demands. As a result, students are afraid of such interaction, and many students never see a faculty member until they are experiencing difficulty. Thus, faculty usually has much interaction with a few, but there are large numbers who they may never see.

This model of instruction makes it possible to involve faculty in instruction through a differentiated staffing concept. This has two distinct advantages: (1) the strengths of each individual faculty member can be maximized; and (2) each student is then afforded the opportunity to either work with or avoid particular teachers as dictated by his own personal preference.

Like all team teaching activities, sometimes the advantages are outweighed by the disadvantages. There are many perils, such as the following: (1) the need for compromise and meshing of individual philosophies; (2) the inability of all staff members to work as a team; (3) the unwillingness of some staff members to assume expected responsibilities to the project, much less to expend more than a minimal amount of time and energy meeting individual student needs and creatively contributing to the development of the program; and (4) student preference overloads certain team members and under-utilizes the talents of others.

Although competency based education tends to minimize group activities in favor of individual, self-pacing, self-directed learning experiences, small group activities need to be an integral component of the model.

Teaching affective domain objectives can best be accomplished in this manner and can be organized within the framework of the competency based model in the form of mini-courses, group help sessions, etc. In some ways the utilization of such activities helps to overcome the feeling of aloneness and impersonality in learning which is one of the prime criticisms directed against the system. There are several difficulties involved. First, scheduling such activities at the right places in the sequence of learning so that students are accomodated at the proper times is like fitting a jig-saw puzzle together. Second, releasing staff time to develop attractive mini-courses within the framework of the larger instructional emphasis can be a problem. Third, students feel so pressured by the requirements of the basic program, that they will seldom attend mini-courses, help sessions or other group activities unless they are required to do so.

Conclusion

From the experience of the Illinois State University's competency based teacher education program, various advantages and problems of this new model of instruction have been presented.

Because it is an open system, it would appear that competency based teacher education may do a better job of teacher education than traditional methods. Since teachers tend to teach in the manner in which they have been taught, perhaps training through this model will orient future teachers to be facilitators of learning rather than just conveyors of information, and to individualize the instruction of children in the public schools, as it has been individualized for them in teacher education.

One wonders, however, what happens to the teacher who is trained through a competency based program and then goes out to teach in a very traditional setting. Is he then able to cope with that?

The faculty of the Curriculum and Instruction Department of Illinois State University is deeply committed to competency based teacher education. Informal observation and feedback from the school systems in which teachers educated through this model are employed appears to indicate that competency based teacher education may indeed be a better way to train teachers. But as yet, there is little hard research evidence either for or against our conclusions. As the model is further refined and researched in the future, more definitive conclusions can be drawn.